

Public safety changes healthy for budget

By David McGee, for the Express-News

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It is a privilege to live in a city that is culturally vibrant, has deep historical significance and is recognized as one of the best places for businesses to thrive and residents to enjoy.

San Antonio provides more than 14,000 acres of city-owned parkland for families, 26 public libraries, a well-maintained system of streets and world-class destination attractions — all of which make the city a community where families look to relocate each year. It is this unique and special quality of life that attracts businesses, good-paying jobs and a growing pipeline of talent. That is why the ongoing negotiations between the city and the police and fire labor unions are of the utmost importance to the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce.

Public safety is also a critical element to our city's quality of life, and we work each day as members of this community to maintain our status as having one of the nation's top police and fire forces. They put their lives on the line every day, and we want to publicly express our appreciation and recognize the importance of their role in our community.

However, our city elected leaders are faced with a very real challenge that has been well documented as they plan for how to best utilize taxpayer money in our city's general fund — which pays for not only public safety (police and fire) but also for parks, street maintenance, libraries, senior services and many other critical city services our residents need.

In a spirit of working together, Mayor Julián Castro convened a 13-member task force to study the issue of the rising costs of public safety pensions and health care. This is an area of the budget that is growing faster than city tax revenue can fund. The chamber has studied the recommendations of the task force and also met on more than one occasion with the police and fire union officials to hear all sides.

The chamber believes the recommendations of the task force are a good start that puts San Antonio in a proactive position of ensuring that public safety compensation (along with union-negotiated benefits) does not swallow up so much of the general fund that it makes it difficult to provide other basic services to our residents. That is what is at stake here — the future financial health and quality of life of our city. We all have a responsibility to come together to find a balanced approach to public safety and quality of life that is in the best interest of every resident.

The chamber's role for 120 years has been to continuously improve the business climate in San Antonio, which is the engine that provides jobs, higher wages and better quality of life for

everyone. This can only be done if our city continues to be fiscally responsible and maintains our AAA bond rating. San Antonio is the only major city in the nation to boast such an accomplishment.

It is in that spirit that the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, its board of directors and members support the recommendations of the task force to take health care benefits out of the collective bargaining process. This does not in any way affect the benefits received by our police and firefighters if they are injured on the job. This proposal simply puts San Antonio on the same terms as our peer cities in Texas and allows for a fair negotiation each year providing good benefits for all city employees at the same time.

For 25 years, our uniformed employees have enjoyed benefits that include paying nothing for their premiums for themselves and their dependents. It is time we ask our police and firefighters to begin to pay a fair share. Current benefits far outweigh what is offered in other cities. Our public safety budget is already at 67 percent of the general fund and growing. Reasonable changes can get San Antonio back on track for a healthy budget for our future. This is an important topic for our city with far-reaching financial implications for both the business community and all taxpayers.

David McGee is chairman of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce.